



Hubert Leber (Ph.D. Candidate)

Lahnstein Scholarship 2011, Philipps University of Marburg

Email: hubertleber\_at\_gmx.de

### West Germany's Policy toward Israel in the Begin Era (1977–1983)

The topic of the dissertation is the Federal Republic's policy toward Israel during the leadership period of Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin (1977–1983). In these years, German-Israeli relations experienced their gravest test of stamina. After a series of conflicts, disturbances in the bilateral relationship reached a climax with the so-called Schmidt-Begin crisis in the spring of 1981 – an unprecedented clash between both countries' heads of government that caused public uproar in Israel as well as in the Federal Republic.

The augmenting tensions in the bilateral relationship originated from two different factors. On the one hand, the differences between Bonn and Jerusalem concerning Middle East politics grew after 1977 – the year when Begin led the right-wing Likud to power, which was a first for the party in Israel's history. The Federal Government, under then-Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, tried to take a "wellbalanced" stance toward the Middle East conflict and increasingly considered – in accordance with other EC states – the interests of the Palestinians. The Begin

government, however, accelerated Israel's settlement policy in the occupied Palestinian territories and provoked international protests with the execution of several military operations, especially the Lebanon campaign of 1982.

The second factor related to the politics of history. After 1977, the remembrance of the Holocaust gained decisive importance in German-Israeli relations. Unlike any Israeli prime ministers that had come before him, Begin had been deeply affected by the experience of the Nazi genocide. This related both to his perception of the Middle East conflict and to his attitude toward the Germans. But also in the Federal Republic's history of remembrance, the late seventies was a turning point. In particular, the broadcasting of the American TV series *Holocaust* in Germany and the debate on the statute of limitations for Nazi crimes – both in 1979 – had the effect that, for West Germans, the murder of the European Jews was all of a sudden more present than ever before.

Combined, these developments – in terms of Middle East politics and of remembering the Holocaust – created a field of tension in German-Israeli relations that contained a previously unknown explosiveness. How the Federal Republic reacted to this challenge is the study's central question.